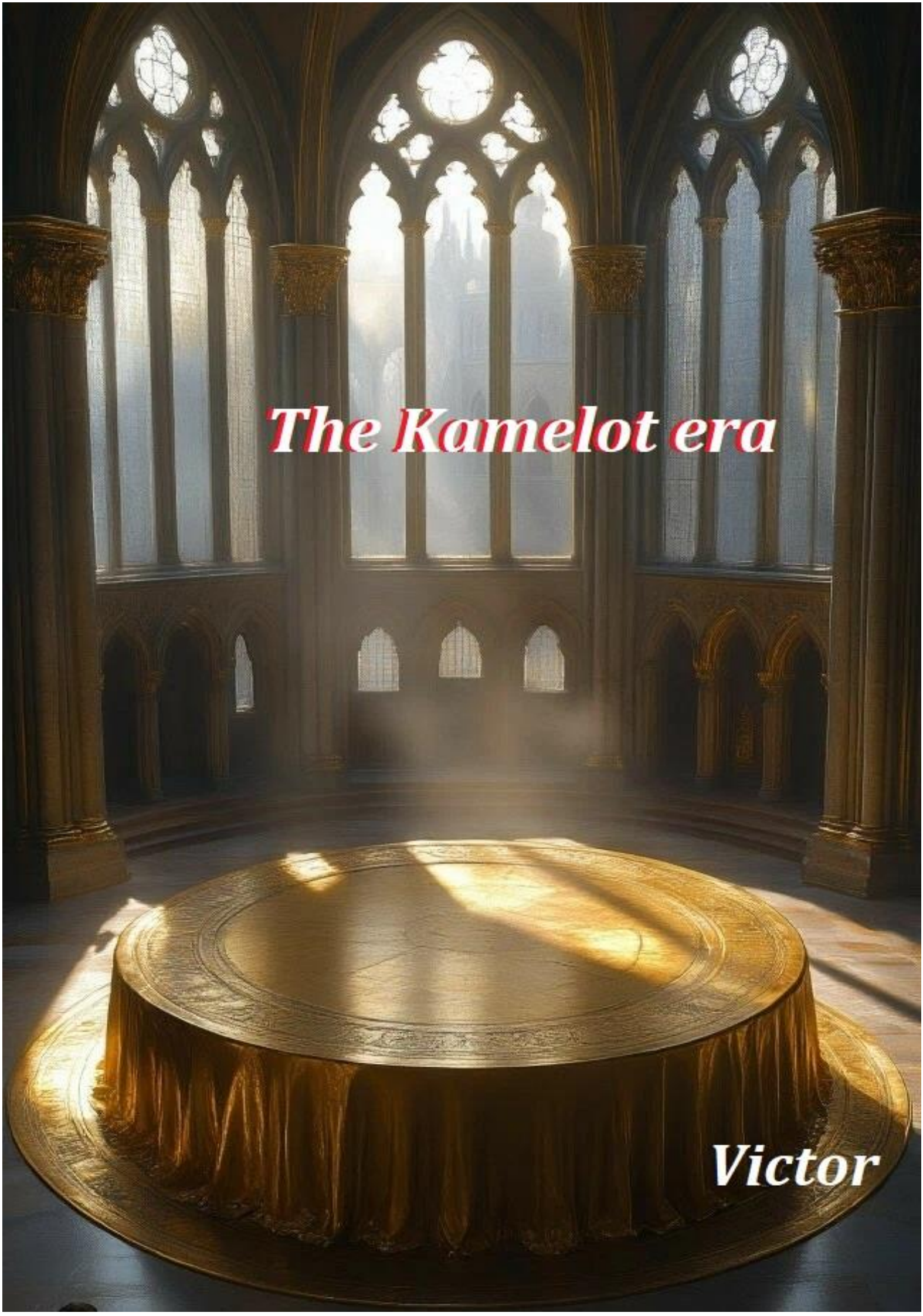
The Kamelot era
Victor

The Camelot era

Victor

2026

Author's Preface

I wrote this story under the pseudonym Victor.

Those of you who take an interest in the mysteries of the past century may perhaps remember this name. Whether this story was truly written under his careful guidance, or whether "Victor" is merely a literary device behind which the author conceals himself — is for you to decide.

But I know for certain: Victor sincerely wanted you to read this text. And, having read it, to pass it on to those who need it.

This is a free project. It was created in memory of such great people as John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and of that one brief shining moment they gifted to humanity.

Victor

Epigraph

Take me up.
Cast me away.
Sacred inscription upon the blade of Excalibur.

Chapter 1. The Ocean

The Atlantic breathed steadily and lazily. The sun stood high, flooding the Newport coastline with a generous midday gold. Its rays fractured in the cool, turquoise water into a billion blinding sparks, and the pleasant, salty taste of the ocean hung in the air.
The snow-white, twenty-eight-meter yacht *Honey Fitz* swayed gently on the waves, like a sleeping swan. Here, far from the scorching asphalt of Washington and its stuffy, smoke-filled offices, in the middle of the endless blue expanse, time itself seemed to slow its pace.

John sat on the stern in a wicker chair. His signature Ray-Ban Wayfarer sunglasses concealed his eyes, and a slight, somewhat tired smile played on his lips. In his hand, he held a chilled, misted bottle of Heineken—a thin trickle of condensation ran down the glass onto his palm. Beside him, in an identical chair, with an identical bamboo fishing rod in his hands, sat General William Blanchard. He was dressed in civilian clothes, a light, pale shirt with no insignia, and from a distance, they looked simply like two old friends who had decided to spend a day fishing.

"A stunning race," John broke the silence, taking a sip from the bottle. "The Australians on their *Gretel* really made our boys sweat this time. At one point on the second leg, I thought the America's Cup was going to sail away from Newport for the first time in a hundred years."

Blanchard chuckled, adjusting his fishing line.
"Oh yes, Mr. President. I haven't seen such fierce competition on the water in a long time. The Australian skipper worked tactical miracles, but our *Weatherly* still snatched the victory. When they overtook them on the final tack—it was pure spectacle. The entire escort fleet roared with excitement."
"It's for moments like these that life is worth living," Kennedy smiled, gazing at the water. "The true spirit of competition, the thrill, and the

clean wind."
"Yes."

John shifted his grip on the bamboo rod more comfortably, not removing his glasses, and peered toward the horizon where the sky merged with the water in a shimmering haze.
"You know, Bill," he began quietly. "More than anything in the world, I love being in this element. Here, on the water, there is some kind of primal truth. This connection with nature… away from the noise, from the endless political bustle, from the press and the Pentagon. It nourishes me, the way roots nourish a tree. I can feel it in my skin, how the ocean waters, like the earth's sap, restore my strength. For me, this is a genuine place of power."

Blanchard turned his head slightly and nodded in understanding.
"I understand you very well," he replied; his voice sounded soft, unusual for a military man.
"I'm a big fishing enthusiast myself. Every free week I have, I try to get away to my native Oklahoma, to Lake Hefner. There, at dawn, when the mist rises over the water and the birds sing, the world seems absolutely pure. And all problems look… insignificant. Water truly nourishes our roots and brings us back to life."

From the bow of the deck came the ringing, bubbling cries of children—little Caroline and John Jr. were laughing merrily about something, listening to Jacqueline. Their laughter, pure and silvery, carried over the water, but didn't disturb the peace; rather, it wove into it in a remarkable way. It seemed as if nature itself was singing along with them: the wind echoed their joy, the waves set the rhythm, and the sunbeams danced in time to this carefree merriment. It was the voice of the future, something worth living for.

John listened to that laughter for a moment, and the smile faded from his face. He pensively twirled the beer bottle in his fingers.
"You know, Bill… I was watching those yachtsmen at the regatta. Seeing how flawlessly coordinated they work. Every maneuver, every turn of the sail is calibrated to the millimeter. A perfect mechanism, where one person's mistake means instant defeat. And I couldn't help but think of your department."

Kennedy turned his head toward the general, his tone becoming businesslike.

"How is your inspection of the Strategic Air Command and Air Force bases progressing? On paper, the Joint Chiefs of Staff always have everything perfect. But you are the Inspector General, you see the inside story. If tomorrow we have to launch our own 'perfect mechanism' at full power… are the armed forces truly one hundred percent ready? Are there any failures in coordination?"

Blanchard hesitated for a second, choosing his words. The tension, hidden beneath his civilian clothes, betrayed the career officer in him.
"Mr. President, as Inspector General, I can guarantee: the SAC pilots are not sleeping. The B-52 bombers are on round-the-clock alert status on the runways, and the communication protocols with the launch silos have been personally verified by me. The mechanism is oiled and ready to work. But… if you're asking about the internal state of the system, the tension among the high command is growing."

John removed his glasses and looked at Blanchard with a direct, unusually heavy gaze. The context of the working inspection instantly dissolved, revealing the main question that tormented him.
"Bill, I want to ask you not as the President to a subordinate. I'm asking you as a brother in arms. We both went through the war. We know what death smells like. LeMay assures me that one surgical strike will decide everything. That they won't even peep. What do you think?"

William Blanchard's face changed instantly. The fisherman's calm disappeared, replaced by a grim, leaden seriousness. He secured his rod in the holder and turned his whole body toward Kennedy. It was at that very moment that a steward appeared on the deck like a silent shadow, carrying a silver tray. Kennedy, without taking his eyes off the general, raised his hand in an almost imperceptible halting gesture.
"Thank you, Lewis. Leave us and, please, ask the guys not to disturb us for now."
"Yes, Mr. President," the steward bowed, silently placed the tray on the table, and instantly vanished into the bowels of the yacht.

Blanchard waited until the footsteps faded, then spoke—for the first time without formality, quietly and firmly:
"Mr. President, I will tell you something that LeMay will never utter at the Joint Chiefs' meetings. I have personally seen what a nuclear strike is. I didn't just read the reports; I signed the combat order for Hiroshima. I dispatched the boys on the *Enola Gay*, and I saw the photographs of

what was left of the city. It is not just a weapon of great power. It is a natural disaster that erases life itself. If we deliver this strike, we will irrevocably lose all this beauty of the world. This ocean, this sun, this life that nourishes us. We simply will cease to be. Yes, I know Hiroshima. But what they are pushing us toward now—this will be a Hiroshima for all of humanity."

Blanchard leaned forward slightly, his voice dropping to a grim whisper: "It's easy for my boss, LeMay, to talk. If everything goes to ashes, he can always say: 'I am a military man, I was following orders.' The full weight of this responsibility will fall on your shoulders."

Kennedy was silent for a long time, looking at his hands. The water lapped quietly against the hull outside, and again, as if from a distance, the bubbling children's laughter drifted over.
"I understand, Bill," John said quietly. "People think that generals only dream of going to war. But the truth is, the military wants war least of all. No one knows its true horrors better than us."

Silence fell; both men were staring somewhere into the distance.
"This whole situation with Khrushchev," Blanchard broke the prolonged pause, gazing thoughtfully at the shining surface of the ocean, "it's like a game of poker. It seems like everyone is just bluffing, raising the stakes and waiting to see who blinks first. Neither side truly believes, deep down, that something irreparable could happen."
"Yes," Kennedy chuckled bitterly, putting his glasses back on and looking into the endless blue. "No one believes that this whole world could vanish in a single moment. You know, it's like death. No person believes that they might, one fine day, die."
"True," Blanchard quietly agreed. "No one believes they can die. But at the same time, no one has yet managed to cheat death."

A heavy, ringing pause hung over the deck again. The only sound was the waves lapping against the hull of the *Honey Fitz*. Jacqueline was cheerfully explaining something to the children, and the wind carried away scraps of their joyful chirping.

General Blanchard took a deep breath, looked around to check if they were truly alone, and looked Kennedy straight in the eye. In his gaze was the resolve of a man stepping into an abyss.
"Mr. President," the general said firmly. "I would like to tell you

something. But you must promise me that no one will ever learn what I am about to tell you."

Kennedy froze, catching the shift in Blanchard's tone. He slowly lowered his bottle to the table.
"Alright, Bill."
"I swore an oath not to disclose this information under penalty of court-martial. But I am convinced: you, as President, must know about it."

John Kennedy leaned forward, his face turning into a frozen mask. All the noise of the ocean, the cries of the seagulls, and the children's laughter seemed to recede somewhere far away, leaving only a tense silence between the two men.
"I'm listening, William. Speak."

Chapter 2. The Message

The silence on the stern thickened. The wind, which just a minute ago had been lazily fluttering the awning, seemed to hold its breath along with the seagulls. The sun had shifted to the west, its light turning from gold to a heavy, honeyed hue, making the shadows on the deck stretch out unnaturally. The ocean no longer seemed like a serene refuge—now it looked like a bottomless, indifferent abyss, washing against the thin shell of the yacht.

Blanchard didn't take his eyes off the President. In his gaze, which had just radiated confidence, there was now a grim, leaden resolve of a man who had crossed the Rubicon. He slowly, almost mechanically, wiped the perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Mr. President," the general began, and each of his words fell like a stone into a deep well. "I know for certain: if the stakes continue to rise, no one will blink. Absolutely no one. Control over the situation is an illusion. All of this will inevitably lead to nuclear war."

Kennedy listened, his head slightly bowed. He didn't interrupt, only the fingers of his right hand, resting on the armrest, slowly clenched into a fist.

"And they will all perish from the nuclear strikes?" he asked quietly.

"No," Blanchard shook his head sharply, almost fiercely. "Only millions will perish from the strikes. That will be the most merciful outcome. The most terrible things will begin *after*."

He fell silent, listening to the distant laughter of the children. His voice, when he continued, became hollow, like a confession.

"The scenario calculated not by our General Staff, but by the one I will tell you about next, paints a picture of hell. Due to a provoked ecological catastrophe, the majority of surviving

humanity will die in agony. Their fate will be so monstrous that…" the general faltered, searching for words, "the living will envy the dead."

Kennedy drew a sharp breath. That phrase, uttered against the backdrop of the shining water, cut his heart more deeply than any report in the Situation Room. He reached for the forgotten bottle of beer but pulled his hand back.

"The living will envy the dead," he repeated slowly, as if tasting the foreign pain. "So, this is the end? Humanity will simply perish?"

"No. Technically—no," a strange mix of bitterness and hope cut through Blanchard's voice. "A few will remain. They will not resemble us. They will lose everything we have now. But they will become the seed, the foundation of a new civilization."

Kennedy removed his glasses and wearily rubbed the bridge of his nose. Now, without the sun-protective lenses, he looked much older than his years.

"And what, in your opinion, will provoke this nightmare?" he asked. "Simple greed or someone's tactical error?"

"Dogmatism," Blanchard said curtly.

"Dogmatism?" the President frowned.

"Yes. A stubborn, blind faith in one's own exclusive righteousness. It inevitably leads to war because it divides the world into 'us' and 'them,' excludes any compromises, and turns a geopolitical struggle into a sacred confrontation with 'absolute evil.' Everyone is convinced that God and the truth are on their side."

"So, no one will flinch," Kennedy summarized, and a chill of understanding crept into his voice. "Everyone will stand their ground to the end. Because they are convinced that the truth is on their side."

"Exactly so."

A heavy pause hung in the air. Somewhere on the bow came the sound of a ping-pong ball dropping, the resonant thud of plastic on the teak deck, and an explosion of children's laughter. The ocean continued to rock the yacht, as if cradling the unsuspecting passengers in its gigantic palm.

Kennedy leaned forward, his gaze becoming sharp, demanding.

"But where does such certainty come from, Bill?" he asked, emphasizing each word. "You said: 'I know for certain.' That's not analysis. That's not intelligence data. What is this secret you are hiding even from your own?"

"Mr. President," Blanchard took a deep breath, as if before a dive into icy water. "I am now going to say something that will seem like sheer madness to you. But I saw it with my own eyes."

Kennedy nodded silently, granting permission.

"Everything I have just described to you is the pure, documented truth. A truth revealed to me by… let's say, a guest from the future."

Kennedy flinched as if slapped. An expression of extreme astonishment, bordering on disappointment, flickered across his face.

"A guest from the future?" he asked slowly, almost syllable by syllable.

"I understand this sounds like the ravings of a madman or the plot of a cheap novel. But it is the absolute truth, Mr. President."

Kennedy didn't answer. He just stared intently at the grey-haired general, a veteran of the World War, a man with an impeccable service record. The President's gaze held a silent command: "Continue, and if this is a joke, it has gone too far."

"Everyone in certain circles knows what happened in Roswell," Blanchard began, speaking more quietly, as if the yacht's walls might have ears. "And they know about my official statement to the press that we had discovered a flying disc. That was the truth."

"Go on," Kennedy drew himself up, his eyes narrowing.

"It was in that very disc that our guest was located. The being that told me all of this."

"But how... how can he be from the future?" Kennedy interrupted. "How could a being from the future crash in New Mexico in 1947?"

"Because he is not an alien. He is our evolved descendant. A descendant of those very survivors," the general nodded toward the horizon, as if pointing to a distant future. "He said that traveling in time is traveling through space. A shift of spatial divergence."

The President slowly rose from his chair. He walked to the lifeline, leaned on the sun-warmed wood, and looked down at the water foaming against the hull. He needed movement to digest what he had heard. After a long minute, he turned around.

"Do you realize this sounds like the plot of a science fiction film?" he asked, but his voice no longer held skepticism. It held confusion.

"I understand that perfectly," Blanchard nodded. "But if I hadn't touched his hands, if I hadn't seen his eyes... I would never have believed it. And I would never have told you this, if the guest's prophecy hadn't started coming true."

"Alright, let's suppose," Kennedy returned to the chair but did not sit down, looming over the general. "Let's suppose this... traveler... is real. Then what interest does he have in warning us? If there is no war, then they, these people of the future, will not exist. Isn't that a paradox?"

"Mr. President," Blanchard raised his tired, reddened eyes to him, "unfortunately, as long as dogmatism lives, war is inevitable. But we have a chance to postpone it and try to fix everything before the mechanism is set in motion."

The general caught his breath.

"As for his interest... I don't know for sure, but he made one thing clear to us. In the future, our descendants have outgrown violence. They learned from our bloody mistakes and now live by principles of mercy and justice. It's not just communism or capitalism... it's something else entirely. He came down to us from the heavens not for technology. He came down out of mercy. He knew he would die. But he also knew about this conversation of ours. That's why he sacrificed himself."

"Yes..." Kennedy sank into the chair. His shoulders slumped. "It is truly hard to believe, even while standing on the edge of an abyss."

"I understand," the general responded quietly.

Silence fell, and only the cries of seagulls could be heard, drifting from somewhere far away.

"What happened to him?" Kennedy asked dully. "To this 'guest' of yours?"

Blanchard's face turned to stone. His jaw muscles tensed.

"The higher-ups took over the matter. They immediately refuted my statement in the newspapers, making me look like an idiot who confused a weather balloon with a saucer. They took personal control of the guest's interrogation. I can only speculate, but... they were trying to extract information from him about weapons and their technologies. Faster, at any cost."

Blanchard paused, and his voice trembled for the first time in the entire conversation.

"Two days later, he died from torture. The body was autopsied, the flying disc was dismantled. And everyone was ordered to remain silent."

Kennedy listened intently. Faces from the CIA, the Air Force, Hoover's irritated face flashed through his mind. A 'guest from the future,' tortured to death in an American hangar... This was the most monstrous confirmation of Blanchard's theory.

"So," the President spoke slowly, "he consciously walked toward a painful, terrible death among savages, just to deliver a message to us?"

"Yes," Blanchard confirmed with bitterness. "And do you know what struck me most of all? He said: 'You, I, he — are all parts of the same life, separated only by the illusion of death.'"

Kennedy sharply raised his head. This phrase struck him right in the heart.

"There is no death?" he asked almost in a whisper.

"He said death was invented by people. It does not exist in the form we are accustomed to thinking of it," Blanchard repeated.

A ringing silence reigned around them again. The heavens were slowly igniting with the fire of sunset. Kennedy looked at the ocean, at the waves breaking against the hull. And suddenly, a barely noticeable smile touched his lips. It was not a joyful smile, but a smile of enlightenment and acceptance.

"You know, Bill," the President nodded to his own thoughts, "perhaps he is right. The wave will crash against the shore, the foam will disappear without a trace, but the ocean... the ocean will remain."

The general suddenly remembered the words John had spoken just the other day:

We all came from the sea, and so salt is in our blood, in our sweat, and in our tears. And when we return to the sea—whether

to sail or simply to look at it—we return to the place from whence we came.

Chapter 3. A True Hero

The ocean seemed to have turned black.
Only a few weeks had passed, and the Atlantic, which had so recently lazily caressed the hull of the *Honey Fitz*, was now transformed into an arena of a deadly game. September brought alarming reports, and October exploded the world with a bone-chilling nightmare. The waters of the Caribbean Sea were no longer plied by yachts, but by Soviet freighters stuffed with nuclear warheads.

The very "poker game" Blanchard had spoken of had entered its decisive stage. The stakes had skyrocketed. A U-2 spy plane, flashing its silver wing in the stratospheric blue, clicked off a roll of film that paralyzed Washington: beneath Havana, ringed by palm trees and camouflage netting, gaped launch silos.

It became hard to breathe in the Oval Office.
For thirteen days—from October 16th to the 27th—the world careened toward the abyss. And then came "Black Saturday." The news that an American plane had been shot down over Cuba and that the pilot, Major Anderson, was dead, struck the walls of the White House like a battering ram.

A true hell broke loose in the Oval Office. The heavy drapes were drawn tightly shut, but even they couldn't muffle the pressure from outside. The Pentagon's generals were no longer sitting in chairs—they were standing, looming over maps, pounding their fists on the polished mahogany table. Their voices rang with metal. The air was thick with sweat, tobacco smoke, and the almost palpable smell of righteous fury. They demanded an immediate, massive airstrike. A full-scale invasion. In their eyes was a cold mathematical calculation and a sacred conviction that they were the saviors of the nation.

Kennedy sat in his rocking chair, gripping the armrests with whitened knuckles. Before his inner vision stood not Khrushchev's face, nor the smoking ruins of American cities. He saw the grey-haired general on the stern of the yacht. He heard his voice, hollow like a confession: *"The living will envy the dead."* He heard the distant, ringing laughter of Caroline.

He knew what the generals did not. His certainty was fueled not by intelligence data, but by the blood of an innocent being, tortured in a hangar in New Mexico.

"No," he said quietly.
The word dropped into the buzzing air of the room, and for a moment, everything froze. Then a squall of objections crashed down with renewed force. But the president was no longer listening. He swam free of that noise, as if escaping a stormy sea.

By some miracle, John Kennedy refused to pull the trigger. To some in the Pentagon, this decision looked like cowardice and a betrayal of national interests. But it is hard to accuse a man of cowardice who could have easily sat out the Second World War in a warm rear post. A man who, by the call of his heart, went to the front lines to fight fascism. A man whose torpedo boat, PT-109, was rammed by a Japanese destroyer in the icy waters of the Pacific. A man who, overcoming terrible back pain, swam for kilometers in the pitch blackness, dragging a burned comrade by the strap of a life vest, saving his guys from the sinking ship.

Now history was repeating itself. The scale had become planetary. Just as once in the Blackett Strait, John Kennedy was saving his guys again, only now his "ship" was all of humanity, rapidly sinking to the bottom in the madness of a nuclear Armageddon.

Displaying a will of steel, he went against the generals. Under the cover of night and a thick fog of secrecy, he sent his brother Robert to a decisive meeting. There, in the stuffy silence of the office of Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin, the fate of humanity was decided. Anatoly Fyodorovich, much like the epic bogatyr Dobrynya Nikitich, also performed a heroic feat by convincing the Kremlin to stop the unthinkable. The American president and the Soviet diplomat stood on opposite sides of the barricades, but both had looked into the abyss and recoiled from it.

Perhaps the sacrifice of the guest from the future had not been in vain. Perhaps it was no coincidence that just a year later, in 1963, Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev—cutting short the fierce instigation of a militant China—uttered in his emotional manner, whether banging his shoe on the podium or simply looking his opponents in the eye, those very same words: *"The survivors will envy the dead."* Where did they

come to his mind? Perhaps the echo of a warning, sounded long ago in the New Mexico desert, had somehow reached his ears by an unknown path? Or was it simply the logic of a man who had peered beyond the horizon of a nuclear inferno?

Be that as it may, a compromise, fragile and secret, was found. John's personal decision, made against the pressure of the entire world, gave humanity one more chance. One more breath.

November arrived in America with a feeling of immense, collective relief. The tension subsided, like a heavy, painful swelling receding, giving way to quiet joys and the anticipation of the holidays.

In the White House, preparations were in full swing for an important family event. Because their birthdays were just two days apart, Jacqueline was arranging one large, shared celebration for Caroline and John Jr.—a Joint Birthday Party.

And so, on November 27th, the presidential residence was transformed beyond recognition. The austere corridors and halls, which had so recently rung with the sound of military telephones, turned into a fairy tale. Everything was decorated with pastel balloons—soft blue and pink—which swayed beneath the ceiling like weightless clouds. On the tables stood gingerbread houses with marzipan shutters and lollipops on a sugar snow. Two identical but separate birthday cakes, crowned with the Kennedy family crest, were baked for the little guests.

About two dozen small family friends were invited, and the children's laughter—that very same laughter that had once sounded on the deck of the *Honey Fitz*—filled the historic walls once more.

Caroline, serious and poised like a true lady, in a fluffy dress, played the role of hostess. And John Jr. was turning two years old. On that day, a photograph was taken that would, many years later, travel around the world: little John, dressed in a tiny white coat, hides his face in his hands, playing hide-and-seek behind a door. The photographer captured this touching moment—a child seemingly trying to shelter from all the chaos of the outside world, not yet understanding that it was precisely for this moment that his father, a true hero, had performed an incredible feat for all of humanity.

Chapter 4. Joint Birthday Party

The halls of the White House were drowning in pastel clouds. Soft blue and pink balloons swayed lazily beneath the high, molded ceilings, brushing against the crystal pendants of the chandeliers and as if driving out of the corners of the residence the remnants of the heavy, smoke-filled air of recent war councils. It smelled of gingerbread, sweet marzipan glaze, and warm vanilla—the White House pastry kitchen had outdone itself, constructing on the long tables covered with snow-white cloths an entire fairy-tale village: tiny gingerbread houses with lollipop shutters, sugar fir trees, and marzipan animals. On the main banquet table, surrounded by silver candlesticks, towered two identical cakes, crowned with the Kennedy family crest—a golden eagle on an azure field.

Children's laughter—pure, silvery, exactly the same as on that midday hour on the deck of the *Honey Fitz*—rolled across the polished parquet of the East Room. Caroline, adjusting her fluffy lace dress like a queen, oversaw the little guests with all the strictness of a five-year-old hostess, directing them to where the presents lay and where the sweets were. And two-year-old John Jr., in his tiny white coat that had been put on him for the occasion, was hiding behind a heavy velvet curtain with a delighted squeal, covering his face with his chubby little hands and peeking through his fingers—to see if any of the adults had found him yet.

It was at that very moment that the photographer pressed the shutter. The flash bleached the room for an instant, and little John squeezed his eyes shut, his palms pressing even harder against his face.

John Kennedy stood slightly apart from the festive bustle, his shoulder leaning against the doorframe. A soft, almost dreamy smile wandered on his lips, but in his eyes—tired, deeply sunken after thirteen days of hell that would later be called the Cuban Missile Crisis—the leaden abyss of "Black Saturday" was still reflected. He had lost a lot of weight during those weeks. His suit sat on him a little more loosely than usual, and shadows had settled beneath his eyes that even the festive atmosphere could not conceal. He had just returned from a most difficult round of negotiations on the dismantling of the Soviet missiles—the titanic work continued every day, without weekends, without respite. For the world to be saved, one single act of will was not enough—now a fragile, multi-layered mechanism had to be built that would not allow that decision to

fall apart. That is why John had only dropped in on this wonderful family celebration for a minute—he had carved out half an hour between two meetings to see his children laugh.

"A wonderful celebration, Mr. President."

The voice came from very close—quiet, with a characteristic military restraint. John turned his head.

Standing beside him was General William Blanchard. This time, he was not in a civilian shirt, but in the impeccably pressed dress uniform of the Air Force. On his chest gleamed his service ribbons—silver and enamel—and each of them spoke volumes to anyone who could read that language. In his hands, the general held a small but clearly weighty package, wrapped in thick kraft paper and tied with a simple silk ribbon—no gift frills, no card. Something in the way he so carefully pressed the package to his chest said: this thing is worth more than any ornament.

"Glad to see you, Bill," John straightened up and extended his hand to the general.

Their palms met. The handshake turned out long and firm—far longer than protocol required. It held something that could not be expressed in words at an official reception.

"Come to congratulate the rascals?" Kennedy asked, and a shadow of his former, pre-October lightness flickered in his voice.

"Yes. And to give your family something very dear to me," Blanchard replied.

He shifted his gaze somewhere over the President's shoulder. John turned and saw Jacqueline—she was heading right toward them, gracefully navigating between the little guests. The First Lady looked tired—those thirteen days had aged everyone—but infinitely elegant. She wore an ivory-colored dress, and her famous smile, so beloved by photographers, shone with a quiet, almost tangible relief after long weeks of fear and uncertainty.

"General Blanchard, what a joy," Jacqueline said, approaching and tenderly touching her husband's arm—a gesture that, to outsiders, looked like simple affection.

"It's the least I could do, Mrs. Kennedy," Blanchard inclined his head slightly, and in that nod there was more respect than in many formal salutes. "I brought a gift. From my family—to yours. It is a very important book. You could say, our family heirloom."

John raised an eyebrow, and in his squint flickered that very same old boyish spark—the one that once, in another life, had lit up on the stern of the *Honey Fitz* during conversations about sailing races and fishing.

"Is it more important than fishing, Bill?" he asked with a light smile, but his gaze became very piercing.

The general's face seemed unchanged, yet his smile vanished, as if it had never been there. The look directed at the President instantly filled with leaden seriousness—the very same seriousness that Jacqueline had seen somewhere before, but could not recall where.

"Yes, Mr. President," Blanchard answered quietly but firmly. "More important than fishing."

For a second, a silence hung between them—dense, almost palpable, like the air before a thunderstorm. Jacqueline froze. In those two gazes—her husband's and the general's—she caught a strange, chilling seriousness, the meaning of which eluded her, but which sent a cold shiver running down her spine. It's like when you enter a room a second before something important is said in it—and the air still holds the echo of those words, but the words themselves have already dissolved.

John nodded silently. The smile left his face—softly, as the sun slips behind clouds. He carefully, almost ritually, took the package from the general's hands, held it for a moment in his own palms, as if weighing it—not the physical weight, but that invisible heaviness that this book carried within it—and then transferred it to Jacqueline's hands.

"Thank you, Bill, for the gift," Kennedy said quietly. He paused, and in his voice, when he continued, something deeply personal, almost intimate, began to resonate. "Thank you for everything."

He clapped the general on the shoulder—briefly, like a brother—and for an instant, let his palm rest on his epaulet.

"Thank you, General Blanchard," Jacqueline added softly, pressing the package to her chest. "We will definitely read your book. I promise."

Blanchard looked at her with a long gaze—for the first time in the entire conversation directly, and not through the President. In his eyes was something akin to hope and sorrow at the same time.

"I am counting on that very much, Mrs. Kennedy," he said. "And I very much hope that your family will come to hold it as dear as ours does."

Chapter 5. Confession of the White Knight

Evening descended upon Washington in a dank November mist. In the White House, that special, ringing silence finally reigned—the kind that comes only after long hours of children's laughter—as if the very walls, still holding the echo of the festive bustle, were resting from the noise. The children, exhausted by games and sweets, had long since fallen asleep in their rooms under the nanny's watch.

John had left again—another meeting, another round of secret negotiations. He had kissed her on the forehead, murmured "I'll be back soon"—she knew that wasn't true—and disappeared behind the heavy door.

Jacqueline remained alone.

She sat in an armchair by the fireplace in the private sitting room, her legs tucked beneath her and wrapped in a soft blanket. In the fireplace, logs crackled quietly, casting warm, dancing shadows upon the walls. Beyond the tall windows, the bare branches of the trees swayed under gusts of wind, but here, inside, it was cozy and almost peaceful—as peaceful as it could possibly be in a house that, two weeks earlier, had been the command center of a world standing on the brink of nuclear war.

On her lap lay that very package—the thick kraft paper, the simple silk ribbon. General Blanchard's gift.

All day, while the children's laughter rang and glasses clinked, she had remembered it. She remembered the strange, almost ritualistic seriousness with which the general had handed the package to her husband. She remembered how John—her John, who had just saved the planet from nuclear fire—had stood with this book in his hands and looked at Blanchard as if a silent conversation was taking place between them, a conversation whose meaning was hidden from everyone else. She remembered the phrase the general had let slip: *"More important than fishing"*—and how her husband's face had changed upon hearing it.

Now she wanted to understand.

Jacqueline carefully, trying not to damage anything, untied the ribbon and unwrapped the paper. In her hands lay an old book in a plain, dark brown leather binding. No embossing on the cover. No publisher's emblems. No golden letters. Only leather, worn by time and by

someone's gentle touch—perhaps by many generations of a single family. The book smelled of antiquity: dry parchment, wax, a barely perceptible hint of frankincense.

She opened the title page. On the yellowed but remarkably well-preserved paper, written by hand in a strange calligraphic script—unnaturally even, almost mechanical in its precision, yet undoubtedly alive—was inscribed:

"Confession of the White Knight."

No author's name. No date. No dedication.

Jacqueline turned the page. A log cracked in the fireplace, throwing out a sheaf of golden sparks. She began to read.

A Message to Posterity

I write these lines in the cell of a monastery. Outside the window is a grey sea, as grey as my hair. My life's journey is drawing to a close, and the time is coming to return home. Before this journey, I wish to free my soul from the heavy burden of the mistakes I have made. But it is not only for the sake of purification that I write this confession—a hope still flickers within me that my experience may protect you from the errors I committed in my life.

The White Knight

I was born in Gaul and was the son of King Ban of Benwick and Queen Elaine. My father was a loyal ally of the young King Arthur, and for this loyalty, King Claudas, when I was still a mere youth, besieged and burned our castle.

I saw my home burn. I saw the tongues of flame devour my father's banners. I saw the walls beneath which I had played as a child come crashing down. I saw my father die—he fought to the last, and his sword broke, but not his spirit. I saw my mother fall, shielding me with her own body. And I, consumed by righteous fury, desperately threw myself into the fray...

And then came the darkness.

A deep, silent, merciful darkness. It covered me like a wave and carried away the pain, the screams, and the flames—all at once.

It seems that my parents, at the cost of their own lives, saved me from death that day. Wounded, I was carried out of the burning castle and hidden away with the druids, in the depths of the forest. These wise elders healed not only my body, but also the most grievous wound of my soul, steeped in the poison of vengeance. In that moment, standing on the threshold between two worlds, thanks to the druids, a path was opened to me to the very Lady of the Lake. She was beautiful, she was all-forgiving love itself, I wept before her, and those tears dissolved the poison of my soul. It was then that I understood that above all stands love, and that forgiveness is higher than vengeance, and I embraced this path with all my heart, and for me, the code of absolute honor and the protection of the weak became the main guiding thread.

The Lady of the Lake said that my destiny lay in the world of mortals, and she returned me to the world of men, gifting me a magical ring capable of instantly dispelling any evil spells, illusions, and deceit. Do not think that, upon awakening, I suddenly found a beautiful ring with precious stones upon my hand. No, this ring is as invisible as the sacred lake of its mistress. But I feel the weight of this ring even now, as I write these lines.

Thus I became the white knight of the Lady of the sacred Lake, known among the people by the name Lancelot of the Lake.

Jacqueline set the book aside. John still had not returned. She went to sleep with the thought that her own white knight, too, had embraced this path with all his heart—the path of absolute honor and the protection of the weak.

Chapter 6. The Victory March

Jacqueline's heart had not deceived her. Her white knight had truly chosen the path of mercy and justice.

After the peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the lifting of the naval blockade of Cuba, John Kennedy's political vector changed radically. At the end of December, what the newspapers dubbed a Christmas miracle occurred: Kennedy personally coordinated an operation to ransom from Fidel Castro the surviving participants of the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. In exchange for the prisoners, Cuba received medicines and baby food worth more than fifty million dollars, raised through private donations. One thousand one hundred and thirteen men returned home to their families—and this was only the beginning.

Freed from the immediate threat of nuclear war, the President focused on the easing of international tensions and the struggle for civil rights within the USA. Guided by a profound understanding of his historical mission, he began to consistently turn the state machine away from the logic of war and toward the logic of peace, social justice, and spiritual liberation.

January 1963 became a declaration of war on economic stagnation and the selfishness of the financial elites. In his State of the Union address and the subsequent Tax Package, Kennedy proposed an initiative that many in Washington considered revolutionary—if not outright insane. He proposed drastically reducing the tax burden on small businesses, giving them a chance to survive. At the same time, the President intended to squeeze the large corporations hard, eliminating their offshore loopholes and slashing the multi-million-dollar subsidies to the oil giants.

In February, Kennedy transferred the impulse of reform to the protection of the weak and the oppressed. He sent to Congress, one after another, bills to support underprivileged youth, to create a system of medical care for the elderly—the very Medicare that would become his legacy—and, finally, the historic message on civil rights. From the rostrum of Congress, Kennedy openly proclaimed what many preferred to keep silent about: racial segregation was undermining America's moral authority in the world. He spoke—and in his voice could be heard the echo of that very code of absolute honor that the White Knight of the Lady of the Lake had once embraced for himself.

March brought the first harsh provocations. Aware of the respect Kennedy commanded among the common people, the right-wing "hawks" and radical circles switched to a tactic of discreditation. They attacked his famous book *Profiles in Courage*, awarded the Pulitzer Prize, attempting to paint the President as a hypocrite and a liar. On the geopolitical level, radicals attacked Soviet vessels off the coast of Cuba, hoping to provoke Moscow and drag the USA into a new war. But Kennedy acted like a warrior at the crossroads of two worlds: he ordered the FBI to protect the ships of the USSR and simultaneously—through secret channels known only to a few—began to feel out bridges to peace with Fidel Castro. By his actions, he proved to everyone that his book *Profiles in Courage* was not just words on paper, but the roadmap of his life. Ordinary Americans felt their spirits soar, for they knew for certain: their President was fighting for their rights and freedoms.

In April, a crisis erupted in Birmingham, Alabama. A Black minister, Martin Luther King—a preacher who had chosen the path of Gandhi's peaceful resistance—was thrown into jail. Kennedy personally interceded for him, guaranteeing the safety of this courageous man. He understood perfectly well that he would lose the Southern vote, but he continued to walk the path he had chosen.

He definitively cut off funding to the Cuban radicals and secretly tasked the Pentagon with developing a plan for the complete withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam by 1965. For the military-industrial complex, this meant one thing: colossal losses.

May became the moment of highest drama. The world was shaken by the footage of the "Children's Crusade" in Birmingham. The next day, overcoming the furious resistance of the Southern governors, he deployed the regular army into Alabama—and the racists retreated. He announced the preparation of a radical Civil Rights Act.

On the twenty-ninth of May, 1963, John Kennedy was at the peak of his political courage. He turned forty-six. In the White House, the staff arranged a warm, almost familial celebration for the President: a festive cake prepared by head chef René Verdon, and humorous gifts. Among them was a miniature wind-up rocking doll that played, in a thin mechanical voice, the tune "Happy Days Are Here Again!"

In the evening, he celebrated his birthday in a narrow circle of family and close friends aboard the presidential yacht *Sequoia*, while beyond

the salon windows, twined with garlands, the dark water of the Potomac lapped gently.

Chapter 7. Minutes of Happiness

The celebration was over. The garlands aboard the *Sequoia* still flickered, everything had grown quiet, and only the dark waters of the Potomac lapped softly against the hull of the yacht, as if cradling it on its broad palm. The children—Caroline and little John—exhausted by games, sweets, and adult attention, had long since fallen asleep in the cabin under the nanny's watch.

Only two remained on deck.

John stood at the lifeline, gazing at the distant lights of Washington. He had removed his jacket and loosened the knot of his tie—at this hour, he looked not like a president, but simply a tired, happy man who had just turned forty-six. The wind from the river carried the scent of water, algae, and something summery, floral, barely perceptible.

Jacqueline approached him from behind, embraced his shoulders, and pressed her cheek to his back.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked quietly.

"About the fact that I'm forty-six," he answered, without turning around, but covering her hand with his own. "And about the fact that, for the first time in a long while, I feel: everything might just work out. The world we spoke of with you at Hyannis Port—it's closer than ever."

She smiled and turned him toward her.

"I have a gift for you," she took his hands in hers and fell silent for a moment. The water lapped against the hull. Somewhere in the distance, a night bird called out. "John, we are going to have a baby."

He froze. In the neon light of the garlands, his face became, for a second, quite youthful—the way she had first seen it many years ago. Then he exhaled—long, brokenly—and pressed her to himself.

"God, Jackie..." he whispered into her hair. "God..."

They stood like that for a long time, and the dark water of the Potomac carried its waves somewhere far away—into the open ocean, into that very Atlantic upon which this journey had once begun.

Later, when John had fallen asleep, Jacqueline sat in an armchair by the porthole. It was quiet in the cabin; only the measured breathing of her husband and the lapping of water overboard could be heard. She was sorting through cards—congratulations from friends, colleagues, senators—and suddenly her fingers stopped.

A simple card, no crests, no gold embossing. Just a few lines, written in a firm military hand:

"Happy Birthday, Mr. President. May the White Light always be your guiding star. May it protect you and your family. Sincerely yours, William Blanchard."

She reread the signature. *Blanchard.* Then she looked at the book in the plain leather binding that lay on the table nearby—for some reason she had been carrying it with her, even though, in the daily bustle, she had not once opened it since the children's celebration.

On the cover was the inscription: *"Confession of the White Knight."*

Blanchard. Blancheur. White. White Knight.

Jacqueline spoke fluent French—the years in Paris, the Sorbonne, her work at *Vogue*. She knew the etymology of that word. She knew perfectly well what the word *"blancheur"* meant. And then she understood that the general had not been joking when he said that this was their family heirloom. For General William Blanchard was a direct descendant of the White Knight.

Jacqueline looked at her sleeping husband. At his tired, gaunt face. She reached for the book, opened it, and immersed herself in reading.

The Awakening Power of Love

Having returned to the world of mortals, I began to diligently comprehend the wisdom of our ancestors and to zealously master the art of war. Through persistent labor, like the highest druids, I earned the right to wear the white garments, which embody the sacred truth of love and a direct connection to the world of the Lady of the Lake.

In the tradition of our ancestors, the color white signifies that its wearer stands outside tribal and earthly laws, for he has received knowledge

from the gods themselves and now brings its light—Imbas—to the people.

The essence of this knowledge lies in the fact that, having reached the shores of the Sacred Lake, I remembered who I am. I remembered that I am the son not only of King Ban and Queen Elaine, but that I am a son of the Lady of the Lake, and that we are all her children, and therefore—brothers and sisters in spirit.

By the age of eighteen, I was already leading a detachment of White Knights, whose primary goal was to reconcile warring kings. People saw by our deeds that we had no selfish motives. People saw that we were merciful and selfless, and at the same time, people saw that we were strong and brave.

But our greatest strength lay in the awakening power of love. Seeing our firm intention to walk the path of mercy, to defend the weak and the destitute—seeing all this, the memory of their ancestors resonated in their hearts. The memory of those times when, before the coming of the invaders, the peoples lived by justice, in harmony and peace. The memory that they are all children of the great mother, the Lady of the Lake. The memory that we are all equal.

My dear descendants, I bequeath you to remember this great awakening power of love. I bequeath you to carry the White Light in your souls and to remember that we are all children of the great mother, the Lady of the Lake.

My Path

"Your path lies across the sea, to the Great Dragon of Britain." Such were the words of the high druid of the White Land, which is now called Albion. For our ancestors, this island, surrounded by mists and sea, was a sacred abode and the cradle of sacred wisdom.

I disembarked upon those shores not with the sword of a conqueror, but with the open heart of a student. And here, guided by the Lady, I met the one who became my brother in spirit—the sage whom people called Merlin. He was one who combined within himself the knowledge of forests and stones, druidic memory, and a new, still-unclear hope. We both looked upon King Arthur as gardeners look upon a precious

sapling. We believed that he would put an end to the chaos and become the king who would unite our long-suffering land.

In those days, we were easy to enchant. I remember how Merlin and I stood beneath the vaults of a new temple, inhaling the scent of incense and wax, and listened to the sermons of the foreign priests. They spoke of love, of forgiveness, of a single God who is Love. Their words were so similar to what the Lady of the Lake had taught me! Merlin and I exchanged glances, and in his eyes, I read the same thought: "We are speaking of the same thing."

But how deeply we were mistaken.

Jacqueline closed the book and drifted into a pleasant sleep, feeling how, in the depths of her soul, the White Light was beginning to be born.

Chapter 8. The Bitter Fruits of True Love

At the end of May, nineteen sixty-three, I turned forty-six. I entered a summer that was destined to become the pinnacle of my presidency—and the moment of the most terrible personal blow.

June began triumphantly. On the tenth, I stood at American University and delivered a speech on peace. I spoke without the usual clichés. I said that it was time to stop demonizing the Soviet people. "We all breathe the same air," I pronounced from the lectern. "We are all mortal." Khrushchev was so struck that he ordered the speech to be printed in Soviet newspapers in its entirety, without a single cut. The very next day, on the eleventh, we broke the barrier in Alabama: federal marshals confronted Governor Wallace and opened the doors of the University to Black students. That evening, I went before the nation and called segregation a moral crisis. I announced that we were introducing the Civil Rights Act to Congress. And at the end of June, I stood before a crowd of half a million at the Berlin Wall and said: "Ich bin ein Berliner." The world applauded.

In July, the impossible happened. On the twenty-fifth, the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was signed in Moscow. The generals gnashed their teeth. The military-industrial complex hated me for managing to achieve its ratification in the Senate.

On the seventh of August, tragedy struck. Our son, Patrick Bouvier Kennedy, was in a great hurry to come into our lives—labor began five weeks early. He was not ready for the harsh reality of the world, and after thirty-nine hours, he stopped breathing. His heart stopped.

Yes, I wept over him—and I am not ashamed of these tears. I held his tiny coffin in my hands and repeated the same words: "He was so beautiful."

But my pain is nothing compared to what Jacqueline felt. Perhaps it is only in moments of such severe trials that we can taste the bitter fruits of true love.

Chapter 9. The Red Dragon

After Patrick's death, Jacqueline withdrew into herself, refused public appearances, and began spending much of her time in solitude. One evening, she once again opened the general's gift and continued reading.

The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

The victory over the eleven rebellious kings was meant to be a triumph of unity. Arthur's army, gathered from across the land, crushed its enemies. I was in the front ranks, and my white garments shone, instilling hope in our allies and terror in our foes. But when the roar of battle fell silent, I saw something that made the power of the Lady within me shudder and grow dim, as it were.

The holy fathers, who had marched with the baggage train and blessed us for battle, stepped forward. They pointed to the defeated kings not as lost brothers, but as vessels of ancient evil that must be cut open. The tortures began. With the blessing of the church, in the name of the crucified God of mercy, confessions were being ripped from the defeated as to where the "ancient treasures" were hidden. I saw how the fire we had brought for protection turned into the executioner's tool. The sheep's clothing of piety slid off the holy fathers, and beneath it, wolf fangs glinted. I rushed to Merlin. He was pale as a sheet. Later, the chronicler Blaise, an obliging servant of the new power, would record this as "the miracles of Merlin," who discovered ancient hoards. But we knew the truth. That night, we both shuddered in horror. Only the prophetic words of the Great Teacher come to mind now: *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. By their fruits ye shall know them."*

Yet, in our hearts, hope for Arthur still flickered. Merlin begged me not to abandon him; he hoped that Arthur would not repeat the path of his father, that he would remember who he truly was, and that only he could unite the peoples. For so it was foretold.

I became Arthur's loyal comrade-in-arms. Such was my destiny—to embody, through my deeds, the bright ideals of Camelot that the old man was trying, once again, to sow.

What can I say, I loved this land with all my heart. And how could it be otherwise, for the White Knight had returned to his native abode on the sacred White Island. For me, the narrow strait separating it from Gaul

was not a dividing line, but merely a river connecting one people—the children of one Mother. I loved this land as if it were a living woman; I, like Merlin, dreamed that it would become free and happy.

Arthur's victory intoxicated us, and in that moment, it seemed to everyone that anything was possible—that peace would reign and an era of mercy and justice would dawn, that Camelot would be and would stand for ever and ever.

Great Rome

The victory over the eleven kings elevated Arthur to the heavens. He acquired a power and might hitherto unseen, and this power went to his head. Merlin and I became witnesses to the birth of the Great Dragon—just as it had been foretold.

But the Great Dragon did not feel his connection to the Source. He did not hear the voice of the Lady of the Lake. He felt only his own greatness and listened ever more deeply to the fathers of the holy church, who, day after day, strengthened within him the spirit of great Rome.

O great Rome! Thou art the creation of the unfortunate children of war, whose hearts have never known the warmth of a mother's love. That is why you came to live by the laws of a wolf pack.

Your law is harsh and simple: the truth is always on the side of the strong. Therefore, law is whatever you declare it to be. Your sword is its first paragraph. The weak have no rights, and any treaty with them is merely a gesture of mercy from the victor.

You assert: what does not belong to a Roman has no lawful owner. For you, the seizure of another's property is not theft, but the acquisition of that which is ownerless. You look upon other peoples with condescension, with contempt; you brand them as barbarians and are convinced that you may do with them whatsoever you please. That is why war, for you, is sacred and always just—for it is waged not for profit, but for the restoration of order.

And your order is utterly clear: the secret of the well-being and prosperity of great Rome rests upon the endless plundering of others by the right of force. And he who does not honor your gods and your emperor—he destroys the state and is subject to annihilation.

You pride yourselves on being predators. You believe that the blood of Mars himself—the bloody god of war—flows in your veins. You worship the red dragon and proudly wear its colors upon your shoulders in the form of purple cloaks and banners.

You have asserted and continue to assert: only by force can order be established. Peace is granted only to the submissive. The arrogant are subdued by war.

Chapter 10. The Battle for Wall Street

The Homestead Hotel, Hot Springs, Virginia. October 10, 1963.

The conference hall was paneled in mahogany. Heavy drapes kept out the midday sun, and the only light came from the desk lamps—each one illuminating the face of a man sitting at the long oval table. The air conditioner was running at full power, but the air still felt thick and viscous.

There were fifteen of them. Fifteen men who controlled two-thirds of American capital. Henry Clay Alexander of Morgan Guaranty sat at the head of the table—lean as a bird of prey, in an impeccable grey suit, with a gold pocket watch chain. Roger Blough of U.S. Steel was seated at his right hand—heavy-set, red-faced, his fingers drumming on the table. Albert Gordon of Kidder, Peabody, Joseph Block of Inland Steel, Walter Wriston of Citibank—all of them were here. The flower of American business. The closed club of the Business Council. Today, a special guest was expected at the meeting.

The President entered unaccompanied. Only Douglas Dillon, the Secretary of the Treasury, walked behind him, serving as the link between these two forces. Kennedy was calm. He swept his eyes over those seated and lowered himself into the chair opposite Alexander. His back was straight. His hands on the table—palms open, but his fingers were slightly tense.

"Gentlemen," Alexander said, and his voice sounded as dry as the rustle of banknotes. "We are grateful to you for finding the time to attend our meeting."

Kennedy gave a barely perceptible nod.

Roger Blough was the first to speak.

"Mr. President, I will be direct. The business community is in a state close to a crisis of confidence. Your administration is systematically creating a climate of hostility. We hear accusations from the White House of greed, selfishness, and a lack of patriotism. That is not the language which the men who built this country are accustomed to hearing."

He paused, waiting for a reaction. Kennedy remained silent.

"The steel industry," Blough continued, "has suffered from your decisions more than others. We remember April of last year. We remember how you called our actions 'unjustified and irresponsible.' Publicly. From a press conference."

"Your actions *were* unjustified," Kennedy replied firmly. "You raised steel prices by six dollars per ton in violation of all agreements. It would have struck a blow to the economy. I stopped it. And if necessary, I will do it again."

A whisper ran through the room. Blough turned crimson but restrained himself. Alexander raised a hand.

"Let us leave steel aside," he said. "Let us speak of money."

He paused—a long, skillful pause, like a card player before a decisive bet.

"Executive Order number eleven thousand one hundred and ten. The fourth of June of this year. Mr. President, by your decision, you authorized the Treasury to directly issue silver certificates. The volume of issuance is over four billion dollars. This is money issued outside the Federal Reserve System. Outside the established order."

He looked Kennedy straight in the eye.

"The Federal Reserve Act of nineteen thirteen grants the exclusive right of money issuance to the Federal Reserve System. Your Executive Order is a circumvention of the law. It is an intrusion into the competence of an independent institution. And we would like to know," he glanced around at those seated at the table, "how we are to understand this."

The silence became absolute. The only sound was the hum of the air conditioner.

Kennedy did not look away.

"My intentions, Mr. Alexander, are perfectly clear. The United States needs a stable monetary system. When a private consortium of banks controls the entire money supply of the country—that is not stability. That is a monopoly. And you know that better than I do."

"A private consortium," Alexander repeated slowly. "You call the Federal Reserve System a private consortium?"

"I call things by their proper names."

Someone among those seated coughed sharply. Albert Gordon shook his head. Wriston scribbled something in his notepad.

"Mr. President," Gordon interjected, "are you not afraid that your actions may undermine market confidence? If investors decide that U.S. monetary policy is becoming unpredictable, the consequences will be catastrophic. Is that what you want?"

"What I want," Kennedy replied, "is for the American economy to work for the American people. I have cut taxes—and we are seeing record growth. I have signed trade agreements—and exports are rising. I am proposing that you invest in the country and create jobs."

Joseph Block slammed his palm on the table.

"It is outrageous to reproach us for not investing in our country and not creating jobs. Who, then, is doing it, if not us?"

A murmur of approval was heard. Joseph Block continued:

"In the eyes of the public, you are placing us in the position of enemies of the nation."

"No," Kennedy cut him off. "I am placing you in the position of citizens."

Block exchanged a glance with Alexander. Alexander shook his head almost imperceptibly. Gordon leaned back in his chair. Dillon, sitting beside the President, remained silent, but his face was pale. He had known these men all his life. He knew what was happening now.

"Mr. President," Alexander spoke again, now more softly, almost paternally. "We all want one thing: for our country to be strong and prosperous. Do not misunderstand us; we are not afraid and are ready to give our last cent for the good of our homeland. But if our power weakens, if our military potential weakens, our enemies will surely take advantage of it, and our country will perish. We ask you to reconsider your course. For the sake of the country. For the sake of stability."

He paused.

"And for the sake of preserving order."

The last phrase hung in the air.

Kennedy held the pause. Then he stood up. All eyes converged upon him.

"Gentlemen," he said, and his voice was steady, almost icy. "I did not come here to bargain. I came here to tell you what I believe is necessary. The economy is growing. Unemployment is falling. We are emerging from recession. But if you think I will allow the monopoly on money to remain in the hands of a few banks without any control from the elected government—you are mistaken. If you think I will allow the oil corporations to pay no taxes while ordinary Americans pay every cent—you are mistaken."

He leaned his hands on the table and inclined slightly forward.

"I will not retreat. Not on the Executive Order. Not on taxes. Not on a single point. Thank you for the meeting."

He turned and walked out. Dillon, hesitating for a second, followed him. The door closed.

Fifteen men remained in the room. The silence was such that one could hear Alexander slowly folding his glasses into their case. Blough stared at the door behind which the President had vanished. Gordon drummed his fingers on the table.

Alexander swept his gaze over his colleagues.

"He doesn't understand," he said, as if to himself, but aloud. "Just a spoiled brat."

No one answered. Outside the windows, the trees rustled. Somewhere far away, beyond the hills, a storm was approaching.

Chapter 11. The Victory of the Red Dragon

On the twenty-second of November, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was killed in Dallas. The motorcade. The car racing toward the hospital. The doctors who could no longer do anything. A few hours later, Vice President Lyndon Johnson took the oath of office aboard the presidential airplane. Standing beside him was Jacqueline Kennedy in that very dress, soaked in her husband's blood. Later, when asked why she had not changed, Jacqueline replied: "I want them to see what they have done."

The first decrees of the new administration put everything back in its place. Military spending began to rise again. The tax loopholes for corporations that Kennedy had tried to close were reopened. Executive Order number eleven thousand one hundred and ten was quietly revoked, without being brought to the public eye. The silver certificates were withdrawn from circulation. The Federal Reserve System regained the monopoly that no one would challenge again. The financiers preserved and multiplied their power for the good of Great Rome.

The course returned to the military rails. Vietnam blazed up. Anyone who took to the streets with anti-war placards risked being branded an extremist. The agency created to fight the enemies of the state turned its gaze inward upon the country. The project begun as a struggle against subversive elements soon spawned an entire system where any malcontent became a threat to national security. Pacifists, conscientious objectors, students were written down as drug addicts and marginals. Martin Luther King was killed, and the distinguished scholar, a professor from Harvard, Timothy Leary, for his calls to refuse to go to war in Vietnam and to quit working for corporations, received from Richard Nixon himself the official status of the most dangerous man in America.

The Red Dragon had won.

Jacqueline Kennedy returned home to her children. That night, when the house had finally fallen silent, she sat by the window, opened the general's gift, and read the final chapters to the end.

With horror in my soul, I watched as the Great Dragon of Britain became more and more like his father—like the Red Dragon. Despite the victory, the god of war demanded new sacrifices, and blood continued to flow like a river.

Merlin was rapidly losing his influence over Arthur. Seeing that the king was sinking ever deeper into Roman pride, the sage, in a desperate attempt to reach his heart, turned to Morgana. Through her, the king's sister, he conveyed a plea to Arthur: to undergo the ancient rite of initiation and meet the Lady of the Lake. Arthur agreed. And just as I once did in my youth, with the aid of the druids, he came to the shores of the sacred lake.

But the Lady did not reveal her face to him. Merlin told me of this with deep sorrow. Arthur stood at the water's edge, haughty, blinded by his own glory, and the mist did not part before him. Instead of the invisible ring, he received Excalibur—a sword that possessed, like my ring, a wondrous power, but of an entirely different nature. And along with the sword came a choice: to keep the blade for himself, or the scabbard.

Arthur remained true to himself. He chose the sword. "The scabbard is the past," he said insolently. "It is the path of weak women, like my sister Morgana. The sword—that is the path of true men. With it, I will conquer the entire world."

With deep regret in his heart, Merlin recounted this story to me. "The prophecy is coming true, Lancelot," he said quietly. "The Red Dragon has defeated the White Dragon in the soul of our king. Now this is not a choice—it is the fate of Britain."

I was in despair. I did not know what to do next. And then the wise old man spoke words that I have remembered all my life—words which now, in this cell, I bequeath to you, my dear descendants: "One must continue to walk the path of mercy, even knowing that ruin is inevitable."

The Fall of Camelot

The Red Dragon won in the soul of King Arthur. With the blessing of the fathers of the holy church, he cast Merlin into a dungeon. Those knights who dared to doubt the godliness of this deed were soon poisoned at a feast—and they fell into a deep, no longer earthly sleep. From their fate,

I was spared only because I never indulged in such forms of entertainment and did not drink at feasts.

Morgana—wondrous Morgana, who remembered her origins, who remembered that she was born of the sea—fled in horror upon learning that her husband had been killed. But Arthur overtook her small band. All of them—men, women, and children—he turned to stone. Thus, the keeper of the scabbard returned them to the Lady of the sacred Lake.

The Red Dragon left only me alive—not out of mercy, but out of fear of my power. Once again, I lost those dear and close to me, and once again, the anger of righteous fury boiled in my heart. I tried to continue carrying my White Light. I tried not to judge Arthur. I tried, by personal example, to awaken mercy within him. But to him, I was only a living reproach to his conscience, and because of this, he feared and hated me more with each passing day.

And then, one day, the cup of my patience overflowed. Seeing how the blood of innocents was being spilled, how the White Island, which I had loved more than life itself, was perishing, I resolved to destroy the Red Dragon once and for all.

The battle ensued. Many glorious warriors fell in it. We were victorious; Arthur fled to his castle. All around, the cries of birds and the groans of the wounded could be heard. The veil of fury was falling from my eyes, and I wanted only one thing: to catch up to Arthur and turn him to stone, just as he had done with his sister. But then, I came to the river. I bent over the water, and my reflection revealed to me a terrible sight: it was not the White Knight looking back at me. Gloating, the Red Dragon was looking back at me.

The gift of the Lady of the Lake saved me from a fatal mistake. I retreated. For the first time in a long while, I felt relief. I lowered my sword and humbly asked for forgiveness. I asked forgiveness of Arthur, whom I could not save. I asked forgiveness of the fathers of the holy church. I asked forgiveness of Merlin and Morgana. I asked forgiveness of the Lady of the sacred Lake.

King Arthur, too, showed mercy and gave me the opportunity to return to Gaul, and the fathers of the holy church permitted me to become a monk. I embraced the teaching of Christ with all my heart, for it is that very same White Light of love and mercy as the teaching of the Lady of

the Lake. Very soon, I shall see them, but in my soul, there is joy and light—for, looking into the mirror, I see that the White Dragon is looking back at me with love.

My dear descendants, I ask of you: remember who you are, and carry the White Light, even when it seems that Camelot is destroyed and the Red Dragon has won.

Epilogue

Jacqueline called Theodore White herself. She wanted him to come immediately. White rushed to the White House on November 29th. He expected that the widow would want to dictate an official obituary to him. Instead, she spoke—and he simply wrote it all down.

The conversation lasted more than three hours. Jacqueline was in that state which White later described as "the absolute clarity of grief"—she did not sob; she was composed to the utmost, and every word weighed a ton.

Jacqueline said that she wanted Americans to remember John's presidency not through the laws, the treaties, and the political victories. She wanted them to remember it through an idea.

She recounted that, before sleep, John often listened to the record of the Broadway musical *Camelot* by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe. John especially loved the final scene—when Arthur, already mortally wounded, understands that his kingdom will crumble, but nonetheless passes on the story of the Round Table to a young squire. And at that moment, the song plays—that very one. Jacqueline quoted the final lines to White:

Don't let it be forgot
That once there was a spot
For one brief shining moment
That was known as Camelot.

She said: "That was his favorite line—for one brief shining moment. That is what he wanted to be. That is what he was. And that is what he will remain."

Colophon

And now, my friend, in your hands rests the invisible magic ring. And it is for you alone to decide what you will do with it. Take it up, or cast it into the sea.